



Emotional Regulation

Emotions are a part of our everyday lives. It is in our nature to feel. Sometimes emotions can play a powerful role in our day-to-day routine and elicit certain behaviors and actions. Sometimes referred to as emotional self-regulation, emotional regulation is described as one's ability to effectively manage and respond to emotional experiences to adapt to the demands of a given situation or environment.¹ It isn't about trying to *not* feel emotions or suppressing emotions, it's about regulating any emotions that arise.

Being able to regulate your emotions means that you can control how you react and feel in certain situations, enhancing your adaptability and resiliency.² Our emotional resilience in coping with stressful situations, or our ability to 'bounce back', stems from emotion regulation.³ You can think about it like a thermostat. Just like how a thermostat fluctuates and then settles on a desired temperature, the same can be said about our emotional responses and consciously adjusting them to be at our desired emotional equilibrium.

Unconsciously, many of us utilize coping mechanisms throughout the day to handle our emotions. While coping mechanisms may help us regulate our emotions, not all are healthy. Healthy coping mechanisms do not cause harm to the individual or those around them, and can help diffuse strong emotions, increasing resiliency in the face of adversity.¹ Unhealthy coping mechanisms can leave lasting or unanticipated damage (physical harm, decreased self-esteem, illness), provide temporary relief, and lead to avoidance in dealing with emotional situations that need immediate solutions.¹ Some common healthy and unhealthy coping strategies include¹:

Healthy Coping Strategies



- **exercising**
- **meditation**
- **talking with friends and/or family**
- **therapy**
- **journalling**
- **adequate sleep**

Unhealthy Coping Strategies



- **excessive substance use**
- **non suicidal self-injury**
- **aggression (physical and verbal)**
- **isolation/social withdrawal**
- **excessive use of social media**
- **negative self-talk**
- **binge eating**

Emotional Regulation in Students

In recent years, there has been an increase in awareness and programming surrounding emotional regulation within the public-school curriculum. As of the 2019-2020 school year, the Ontario government enhanced the Health and Physical Education curriculum to include a focus on **social-emotional learning skills** from grades K-8, which focuses on managing emotions, communication, coping with stress, and building healthy relationships. According to the 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey (AOSS), Ontario's principals reported an increase in behavioural issues, lack of self-regulation, and mental health challenges within the classroom, in part due to lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

Research shows that students without emotional regulation skills, or who struggle to utilize them, tend to exhibit greater levels of depression and insomnia, show a decrease in well-being, and are not able to properly establish positive relationships with their teachers or peers, effectively utilize high-order cognitive processes (e.g., attention or working memory), or regulate behavioural control (e.g., impulsive aggression or antisocial behaviour).^{3,5} On the flipside, studies indicate that students who demonstrate the ability to regulate their emotions often experience better mental health, reduced stress, better decision-making, and healthier interactions/relationships.³

Within the post-secondary realm, employing mindful-based strategies has been shown to increase emotional awareness, reduce psychological stress, and improve psychological well-being, strengthening students' coping strategies.⁴ Some of those mindful-based strategies include⁶:



breathing exercises



mindful eating



connecting with the five senses



journaling interactions that left you with positive feelings



yoga



body scanning (i.e., mindfulness meditation involving mentally 'scanning' your body for any pain, tension, or discomfort)



sitting mindfulness



perceiving emotions and bodily sensations during interactions

Recent studies highlight a correlation (i.e., not a direct causal relationship) between emotional regulation and mental health and well-being in post-secondary students, indicating the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the residual effects of the lockdown playing a significant role in this relationship.⁷ The ability to emotionally self-regulate in post-secondary students also correlates to self-compassion, subjective well-being, and optimism.⁸ On the other hand, emotional dysregulation in post-secondary students is correlated to distress and overall decreased mental health.⁸

Emotional Dysregulation

With schools recently embedding social-emotional skills learning in their curriculum, most individuals begin to learn how to manage and regulate their emotions. In extreme cases where an individual is not able to regularly use coping strategies to moderate their emotions, leading to poorly regulated and disproportionate emotional responses to the situation at hand, there is a focus on emotional dysregulation.^{1,2} It's important to note that not all cases of someone not regulating their emotions are dysregulating. Emotional dysregulation occurs in extreme cases. In some instances, we may not be able to properly regulate our emotions, but that isn't to say we are exhibiting emotional dysregulation.

This inability to moderate emotions can lead to disruptions within your career, social relationships, and more.² Emotional dysregulation impacts executive functioning (i.e., memory, self-control, mental flexibility), critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which, for post-secondary students, makes them unable to make decisions or effectively and efficiently study.⁹

Emotional dysregulation may look like²:

- » becoming easily frustrated or annoyed by small inconveniences
- » mood swings
- » feelings of being stuck, producing negative moods like depression
- » risky and impulsive behaviour (e.g., sexual behaviour, substance misuse, violence)
- » prone to losing your temper
- » letting emotions interfere with pursuing and achieving goals

Consequences of emotional dysregulation in post-secondary students can lead to^{3,10}:

- » academic probation
- » pattern of class withdrawal
- » failing classes
- » binge drinking
- » social impairment
- » increased levels of test anxiety
- » pattern of taking too many classes in one semester
- » conflict with instructor(s)
- » gambling
- » internet addiction

Emotional dysregulation is not something that can be self-treated with coping mechanisms as it is most often linked to mental health conditions, neurodivergent individuals, or individuals who have damaged certain areas of their brain.² Individuals may want to seek support from a qualified mental health professional.



Program Highlights and Interventions

University of Toronto – Better Coping Skills

The University of Toronto offers sessions to students on how to cope with overwhelming thoughts and/or emotions and how to improve self-management. Through these sessions, students can build upon skills that help address unhelpful thinking, regulate emotions that interfere with day-to-day life, and address any difficulties they face with anxiety and mood.

STOPP Strategy

This effective technique allows you to interrupt any negative or demeaning thought patterns and emotional reactions, and instead, provide an opportunity to understand your emotions before acting upon them. This technique allows for self-reflection and distance from your emotions, thoughts, and feelings. This is also available as a free app, available for [Google](#), [Windows](#), and [Apple](#).

Emotional Intelligence Exercises

This set of 3 exercises and worksheets, some individual-based and some group-based, provide strategies to develop emotional awareness, understand your own emotional reactions, and uncover false beliefs about emotions.

References

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